

Proper 24A - October 19, 2014
Exodus 33:12-23; Psalm 99; I Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22
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Today's gospel passage is not some definitive teaching of Jesus on the subject of paying our taxes, or on the separation of church and state; but rather, in Matthew's gospel it is part of a series of confrontations initiated by the religious authorities during Jesus' last and extended visit to the Jerusalem Temple. These authorities had already decided to have Jesus killed (12:14); but they first had to publicly entrap him. Ironically, in each of the successive confrontations in this chapter—over taxes, and then regarding resurrection and the Great Commandment—Jesus actually affirms the authorities' theological positions (see esp. 23:1-3). Yet, in each of these confrontations, despite their flattering introductory words, it's clear the authorities are not seeking instruction or dialogue with Jesus but are trying to ensnare him. Jesus again shows himself as the master of the situation, and won't be caught so easily.

In this passage, in a clever move designed to entangle Jesus in their partisan political quarrel, the Pharisees and Herodians first ask him a question with no right answer: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" Contentious partisan political debates are as old as human civilization. The party of the Herodians represented the overt supporters of the Roman imperial regime and supported the paying of the tax; whereas the Pharisees were more popular with the people because they, in principle, resented and resisted the tax, but didn't go as far as the more radical nationalists called the Zealots who publicly resisted its payment. The fact that Jesus recognizes this as a "test" alerts us to a deeper issue. This is not just a question about whether or not to pay taxes; rather, it is a question about whether or not Jesus can be enticed to play partisan power games. For Jesus, power is not a game and it is not partisan.

The specific tax issue in play in this gospel was not the paying of taxes in general (or in the abstract); but rather, refers to a particular tax, namely the "census" or Roman head-tax, instituted in the year 6 CE, when Judea became a Roman province after having lost its independence some 70 years earlier. This census and the tax triggered the nationalism that finally became the Zealot movement, which later fomented the disastrous rebellion that began in 66 CE, resulting in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by 70 CE. Matthew, writing after these events, looks back on this whole movement and its tragic consequences and knows the tax issue still engenders deep feelings in his community. This tax could be paid only in Roman coinage, most of which contained an image and inscription considered blasphemous by both Jews, and the early Christians as well. Translated, the coin read "Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus, high priest."

So "is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" Jesus is being asked a trick question, calculated either to alienate the nationalists and others if he replied in the affirmative, or to make him subject to arrest by the Romans if he declared against paying the tax.

Jesus, of course, doesn't have one of these Roman coins. But the Pharisees, in the sacred precincts of the Temple manage to produce such a coin with its idolatrous image and inscription—acknowledging that despite their protestations, they are Caesar's. When Jesus pronounces that what is already the emperor's should be given to him, while avoiding either a direct yes or no, he in fact, gives an indirect yes to their specific question that it is not against the Torah—the Jewish Law—to pay taxes to the emperor; remember that the form of the question posed to Jesus begins “Is it lawful...?” The Pharisees themselves acknowledge this by participating in the economic system made possible by Rome, even by having these Roman coins in the Temple area. Jesus' response has the effect of silencing them and they depart from this round of confrontation in amazement—or more correctly translated, in “shock.”

Of course, in the same breath in which Jesus declares that paying taxes to support the secular/pagan government of the Roman occupation is not against the Jewish Law, he does go beyond their original question, declaring that what is God's must be given to God. Now, he is not making some sort of division of the world into two separate realms – the spiritual and the temporal, the sacred from the secular—with two separate sovereigns, as some have interpreted this over the centuries. Rather, this seeming dualism rests in a belief in One God who is Lord of all, as is stated in the prophet Isaiah: “I am the Lord, and there is no other.”¹ Thus the kingdom of God represented by Jesus embraces all of personal and public life. Neither Jesus nor Matthew's gospel advocates the separation of religion and politics, the spiritual from the temporal. Matthew throughout portrays John the Baptist, then Jesus and the community of faith that are his followers, as belonging to the succession of Israel's prophets who never made a split between religion and the public or political aspects of life.

Matthew's gospel is clear that loyalty to God is a different and higher category than loyalty to Caesar. But this gospel text is not an explicit instruction on how people like you and me who live in a complex society of competing loyalties are to determine what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God. It simply declares that the distinction must be made of what belongs to Caesar, as some things do, and what belongs to God in whom our ultimate loyalty belongs. And the gospel leaves it to us, informed by our own situations and by the Holy Spirit of Christ, to actualize and act on this distinction. “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.” Those whose lives are committed to God must always bear in mind that God is the only absolute whose authority challenges every other ideology and presumption of power.

Our own Episcopal House of Bishops stated this powerfully some years ago:

“It is our duty as disciples of the Prince of Peace to insist upon policies that are consistent with the maintenance of equity, fair dealing and the sanctity of pacts and agreements among races and peoples...An excess of nationalism or an attitude of detached unconcern for the ills of other nations...deprives us of any opportunity to be a conservator of the world's peace. Love of country must be qualified by love of all [hu]mankind; patriotism is subordinate to [God/]religion. *The*

Cross is above the flag. In any issue between country and God, the clear duty of the Christian is to put obedience to God above every other loyalty.”ⁱⁱ

Thus with that in mind, the wise First Amendment Constitutional doctrine of the separation of Church and State does not separate Christians and other people of faith from the public arena. Faith, of course, is personal, but it is not private; and Christianity cannot be fully, spiritually redemptive without being socially responsible. Our biblical faith states that Jesus is Lord: the Lord of all creation, the Lord of our personal and family lives, and the Lord of society and all its institutions, be they social, political, economic as well as religious. The Church’s role as a community of faith is: to call attention to the ethical dimensions of all issues; to keep alive the values of the Gospel as a norm for social, economic and political life; and to point out the demands of the Christian faith for a just transformation of society.

Now, having said this, we need to remind ourselves that as we attempt to apply spiritual values to our public life, Christianity is not about imposing sectarian doctrines on others’ lives. Nor is it about becoming a religious interest group or single-issue voting bloc. In fact, the Church—a community of conscience within our pluralistic public arena—is called to offer an alternative to ideological religion (whether from right, left or center). The Church is called to be value-driven but not ideological, political but not partisan, civil but not soft, and involved but not used. Discipleship, citizenship, leadership – together we seek to develop these here in this parish and in our wider community, just as our gospel today would have us question in all we do what it means to “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

ⁱ Isaiah 45:5; see also Isaiah 43:11 and 44:6.

ⁱⁱ Episcopal House of Bishops Pastoral Letter of Nov. 9, 1933